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FEATURE MATERIAL

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FEDERAL PROGRAMS AIM TO SAVE DISAPPEARING WETLANDS

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the Migratory Bird Conservation Act. Enacted by Congress on February 18, 1929, the Act established a Migratory Bird Conservation Commission to review and approve proposals for the purchase or lease of land and water areas as refuges for migratory birds.

Two conservation-minded agencies, the U.S. Department of the Interior's (USDI) Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) and the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Soil Conservation Service (SCS), are working together to protect migratory birds and their wetland habitats. But their battle is far from being won.

Acquiring or Improving Wetlands

Because of its responsibility to protect migratory birds and their habitat, FWS acquires wetlands that are especially important to waterfowl. Wetlands may be acquired through withdrawal from public domain lands, purchase, or by lease from private owners. Wetland easements are also purchased to prevent drainage. These wetlands then become part of the National Wildlife Refuge System, either as refuges or as waterfowl production areas. Of the 34 million acres now included in the National Wildlife

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Refuge System, more than one-third are wetlands. Although most of these wetlands were acquired specifically for waterfowl, they also preserve habitat for many other species.

In 1962, FWS began an accelerated habitat acquisition program. Wetland habitats have been separated into 33 categories with priority given to areas where birds breed or winter and to wetlands of value to declining species. Particular effort is being made to preserve areas of high wildlife value that are in danger of being destroyed in the near future. Under this program, about 2 million acres of wetland habitats have been preserved, and the nationwide goal is to preserve another 1.95 million acres. Most of these areas are being paid for with "duck stamp dollars" from hunters and conservationists or from loans to be repaid from duck stamp funds. All refuge areas must be approved by the Migratory Bird Conservation Commission.

An important means of preserving wetlands--and an alternative to fee purchase or perpetual easements--is the USDA's Water Bank Program. In more than a dozen States where waterfowl areas are most vital, landowners take wetlands and adjacent upland acres out of farming in return for payment and technical help to improve these habitats. As of December 1978, about 519,000 acres of wetlands and adjacent areas were under agreement in the program.

SCS is involved in many fish and wildlife projects designed to enhance existing wetlands and to create additional wetland habitat for waterfowl. SCS works with State and local governments to improve and expand waterfowl habitat by creating waterfowl impoundments, food plots, level ditches, and upland nesting cover. A major part of the Nation's wetlands must continue to be provided on private lands, usually in close association with agriculture. These wetlands in private ownership not only provide valuable wintering, migrating, and breeding habitat for waterfowl, they also provide habitat for many other species of fish and wildlife.

Collecting Information

One of the first steps toward preserving wetlands is to identify where they are and what options are available for preserving and managing them. FWS and SCS are working together to locate and describe wetlands throughout the United States.

FWS is now conducting a National Wetlands Inventory to collect information about where wetlands are, what types of habitat they provide, and how they are changing. Wetlands are mapped from aerial photographs and each wetland is described according to a new classification system developed to improve the definition of different types of wetlands. All information for each wetland is stored in a computer data bank for easy retrieval. The inventory's design allows for regular updating, important

for detecting changes in areas where population, industrial, and agricultural pressures are greatest.

SCS is obtaining statistical information about wetlands from its erosion inventory of America's non-Federal lands. SCS, in cooperation with State and Federal agencies, is also making a complete geographic inventory of soil resources in its soil survey program. An SCS employee is working with the National Wetlands Inventory team to provide information about wetland soils. SCS and FWS have also worked together to make information from their respective inventories compatible.

The joint efforts will enable both agencies to complete more detailed and accurate wetland inventories and will give scientists, local planners, and others quick access to wetland information.

Evaluating the Effects of Water Projects

Many types of water development projects, from construction of drainage, irrigation, or navigation facilities to erection of large dams can contribute to the degradation of wetlands.

With assistance from SCS and other agencies, FWS is developing a habitat evaluation procedure for measuring the impacts of such water projects on fish and wildlife resources. SCS is assisting with development of the system and efforts to field test it when planning watershed projects.

SCS and FWS have also jointly issued nationwide guidelines to minimize the impact of stream channelization in small watershed projects on fish and wildlife. The guidelines help personnel of the two agencies evaluate the potential effects of channel modification on wetlands, streamside vegetation, and other fish and wildlife habitat and identify alternatives to channel modification.

SCS also is moving to increase the amount of conservation land treatment such as terracing, fencing areas critical to erosion control, and establishing ground cover before structural measures such as dams can be installed. SCS is working to design future projects in which watershed aims can be achieved with principal emphasis on non-structural measures.

FWS reviews other types of projects that require Federal permits to divert or deepen channels or otherwise modify streams and wetlands. Such projects run the gamut from large Federal projects constructed by the Army Corps of Engineers or the Bureau of Reclamation to private construction of docks or piers in navigable waters. FWS also reviews requests to discharge dredged and fill materials into waters of the United States, which require Federal permits under the Clean Water Act of 1977.

FWS advises on the consequences of these projects to fish and wildlife and recommends measures to mitigate or prevent damage. In the past these recommendations have included using pilings for ducks and piers, rather

than placing them on solid fill; retaining minimum flows in streams; and locating and designing pipeline, highway, and transmission corridors to reduce damaging environmental impacts.

Planning Ahead for Wetlands

Runoff from farms, mines, and forestry operations can severely disrupt wetland ecosystems. Under the Clean Water Act, both SCS and FWS work with State and local governments and private individuals to plan ways to eliminate such non-point sources of water pollution.

FWS is also working closely with State agencies under the Coastal Zone Management Act to develop plans for protection of coastal marshes and wetlands which contribute to the maintenance of the sport and commercial fisheries of our coastal and marine environments. FWS works with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in administering EPA's wastewater treatment facility grant-in-aid program to either locate sewage lagoons outside of wetlands or to minimize the effects of sewage lagoons on wetlands.

As part of the effort to place greater emphasis on preserving wetlands, FWS recently established a new position of wetland coordinator to provide information on and guidance to wetland programs. By establishing a single source of information about wetlands for government and private agencies and concerned citizens, FWS can facilitate the exchange of data about wetlands and help identify steps that can be taken to preserve these resources.

USDA is well along in developing the first appraisal and program under the Soil and Water Resources Conservation Act of 1977 (RCA). Wetlands are an important concern identified by the conservation districts and more than 159,000 citizens who attended public meetings to discuss conservation problems.

The revised USDA land-use policy issued in October 1978 incorporates wetland protection and floodplain management more fully into USDA's overall policy of making and advocating land-use decisions that preserve the resource base and are responsive to the needs of the American people. Under the new strategy, USDA will step up its assistance to local and State governments and individual land users to meet their needs for growth and development, to protect the natural environment, and to assure adequate supplies of high quality food, fiber, wood, and water.

Many other programs by Federal agencies, States, and private organizations have been established to protect wetlands. But in spite of these efforts, destruction of wetlands continues to outpace protection. Public support for wetlands preservation is a must if we are to maintain our remaining wetlands for the future.

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